

The early days on the trapline

by Gary Titus



“It’s mighty lonesome-like and drear. Above the Wild the moon rides high, And shows up sharp and needle-clear, The emptiness of earth and sky; No happy homes with love a-glow; No Santa Claus to make believe: Just snow and snow, and then more snow; It’s Christmas Eve, it’s Christmas Eve.” The “Trapper’s Christmas Eve,” a poem by Jack London was first published in 1912.

The cold days filled with the soft, warm light of winter are the trappers’ time in Alaska. As the leaves change colors and the cold north winds blow, the turn-of-the-century trappers moved into cabins where they would cut wood and harvest a supply of meat for the winter before the snow began to fall. After the first hard freeze they set traps and snares and began the routine of checking the trapline, returning to the cabin with the catch, skinning the animals and stretching the furs.

The trappers traveled into the wild unexplored places and braved cold, starvation and loneliness. Travel was by dog team when snow conditions were good; otherwise a pack was thrown on a dog which followed the trapper who traveled on snowshoes, or else the trapper set out by himself. Either way the traplines were hard work.

Around the turn of the century two trappers had a plan to make life easier on the trapline. Though they had used sled dogs most of their lives, the years were catching up with them and they needed to free themselves from the difficult task of maintaining a dog team. These trappers were Robert Mathison and his

brother Charles who came to Alaska as young boys with their father to prospect for gold. They grew up learning to hitch up dogs behind a sled and enjoyed the excitement of mushing dogs in the wintry landscape surrounded by high mountains—many a young man’s dream.

Growing up they lived in the Hope and Chickaloon River regions where in the summers they worked as prospectors and ran a freight barge in Turnagain Arm, visiting Portage, Hope and Anchorage. In the winters they trapped. Their trapping area was in the remote Chickaloon river region located on the northern Kenai Peninsula, where they built a homestead.

The planning stage concept was to develop a method of running the trapline without the year round chores of maintaining a dog team. These chores involved gathering a year round supply of food and the daily feeding and cleaning up the dog yard. It was difficult just being tied to the homestead year round, let alone the extra work. There had to be a better way.

Thus was developed the first skimo-bus to work an Alaskan trapline. Always mechanically inventive, the Mathison brothers made a “Skimo-bus” from a Model A Ford on which they placed three tracked wheels on each side. The engine protruded unsupported over the snow in front and a wooden extension of the body at the rear balanced the vehicle. The machine was described in a newspaper article as a “Rube Goldberg” affair; this term sent me to the dictionary where I found the description: “a deliberately over-engineered apparatus that performs a very simple task in a very complex fashion.” Looking at the photo I believe the description fits.

With this vehicle they traveled over two traplines pulling temporary cabins built on skids. At selected sites along their traplines these cabins were left beside the trail; no longer did they need to build and maintain small log line cabins. The Mathison brothers boasted, “Better than dogs for the trapline, with it we run the line in half the time and cheaper.” With their skimo-bus, the Mathisons opened up the country which was their home.

It was a functional contraption, but it had its drawbacks and disadvantages, and in 1958 they abandoned

the skimobile for a more conventional weasel.

After Charles died in 1960 Bob Mathison continued to live on the homestead by himself. He became friends with the animals around his home, especially the moose. He continued trapping into the 60s, running the same traplines and maintaining the trap cabins. "People think it's no good living in a cabin with no running water, but I wouldn't trade my life for anything in the world," pioneer Bob Mathison often said on visits to Anchorage. "I've always been my own boss."

Mathison's cabin was no longer so isolated. Hunters flew in, and after the pipeline for natural gas was put across the northwest Kenai Peninsula, people traveled over the cleared trail with snowmobiles and

other vehicles. In January 1967, Bob Mathison's life ended tragically in a fire, which consumed his cabin.

Today trappers run the same lines as the Mathison brothers, though the snowmachines are better and the nights are spent in the warmth of their homes. Otherwise, the routine of checking the trapline, returning to the cabin with the catch, skinning the animals and stretching the furs remains the same. Traplines are still hard work in the beauty of the Alaskan winters.

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